

Actions Speak Louder . . .

Anna C. Monahan

"**W**HIO did this?" came explosively from the bedroom. And from the living room, out of sight around the corner, piped the answer, "I did it, Mommy. What did I do?"

Usually he had, too, whatever it was. When the television acted up, he had "poured water down the little holes in the back, cause that's how Mommy fixes her iron." He dragged his grandmother's freshly washed, still wet clothes across the basement floor and up the steps so he could drop them down the clothes chute "to see how it worked." If his own room was too warm for comfort, he turned off the furnace and the rest of the family were chilled through. He discovered how to build a ladder by pulling out the drawers, each a little farther than the one above, in the cabinets and chests, and no spot in the house was inaccessible. He knew how to operate the dishwasher, the garbage disposal, and the washing machine, and how to fix the temperamental clothes dryer—"You have to kick it, right there."

They couldn't teach him how to fight, but he could run faster than any other little boy in the neighborhood. It seemed to his mother that she could look out the window almost any hour of the day and see Chris, his skinny little legs working like pistons, with a pursuer just an arm's length away. Exasperated, she talked to him about standing up for his rights and taking his own part; his dad tried to teach him to box. His reasoning was always the same.

"I *can't* hit him. He's my friend!"

There was one exception to this rule. Although Sharon, his younger sister, was a husky little tomboy and a match for any child in the neighborhood, let any hand, no matter what its size, be raised against her, and Chris materialized like magic. "Let her alone! She's my sister!"

Ol' Lady Kratch

Mary Johnson

NO! SHE ain't no sixty years old. She's only forty. I don't care who told it. People talk bad about her now; they forget how good she was. After her dad died, she didn't have to keep the Cabinet Works going. She'd been away to school all her life, remember. She didn't have no ties here in Kratchville. But she stayed just the same. If she'd sold out, everybody here woulda had to go to Daleville for work cause the Kratch Cabinet Works is all we got. She raised wages and give vacations—that's something Ol' Man Kratch would never a done. And that ain't all she done neither. She put lots of kids from this town through college and, if you'll remember, Elinor Jenkins was one of 'em.

Miss Kratch shoulda married; then none a this woulda happened. But who could she a married here? The young people leaves as soon as they're out a school and everybody else is already married. Oh, there's some strays, but hardly nobody's got the nerve to ask her. No! She ain't no snob. But it's like she's different from us. I cook and clean for her and she's always gotta have flowers on the table even if it's just sardines and she's always gotta have butter plates and things like that. She's got so much more education than any a us that, I guess, we think we bore her.

One time Sonny Trinkle took her to the roller derby over at Daleville. He told all over town that all she wanted to do was neck. But that's how Sonny is—full of wind. Now people thinks back to what Sonny said and say it musta been true. They say she was on the make for Garson Tarpley the minute she saw him, but it ain't so. Tarpley had only been in town a couple a days when he come out to Miss Kratch's with his shoe catalogue. He was fine to look at, but his clothes! We almost couldn't hear him for the suit he was a wearin'. (No! There ain't no such think as a talkin' suit—I mean his clothes was loud. I just waste jokes on you.) Well, anyway, Miss Kratch invited him in and had me bring him some lemonade and she ordered two pair of shoes from him for me. He couldn't get her to buy none cause she gets hers special from New York. She was just considerate to him like she is with everybody. The next thing we knowed, Tarpley was seen at the drive-in with Elinor Jenkins. Her dad is Moss Jenkins, foreman at the factory.

They weren't a bit secretive about it; they was seen everywhere between here and Daleville durin the next two weeks. Nobody liked it; least of all Miss Kratch. Well, she had reason! She was payin for Elinor's school over at Daleville and Elinor had another year to go. Now, Miss Kratch didn't make Elinor break her engagement like they're tellin. I served em coffee on the porch and I heard. Miss Kratch just told Elinor what travelin salesmen are like and how she had heard he had taken up with another girl over at Daleville and how he'd probably just leave her when he went to another town. Elinor got mad right away and said it was a lie and that she and Garson was goin to be married. Miss Kratch asked Elinor what she was goin to do about school and Elinor says flat as a pancake,

"Quit!"

"You'd better wait until you've graduated, Elinor."

Elinor screamed she was sick of bein raised by Miss Kratch and told her father he was afraid to stand up to Miss Kratch cause she'd fire him and then she ran off cryin. Miss Kratch just told the Jenkins that it was their responsibility not to let Elinor make a mistake like this. She was just offerin advice. She even paid Elinor's way out west that summer to help her forget Tarpley.

Tarpley was still in town and one night he got drunk and stood on Miss Kratch's steps and screamed at her for bustin up his play-house. The marshal took him away for disturbin the peace, but they

had to let him go the next mornin cause Miss Kratch wouldn't press charges.

Everybody thought that was all of Garson Tarpley and then one afternoon he come up the walk and said he wanted to apologize to Miss Kratch. He had a big bunch of roses in his hands, but I wouldn't a let him in if Miss Kratch hadn't a come out and said it was O.K. He stayed with her all afternoon and the next and he always brung her something—candy, flowers, perfume—smelled like Blue Waltz to me. It was pretty clear to me that she was stuck on him; she acted like a teenager—giggling at nothing and talkin all the time. Then she started buyin him things. I wrapped a cigarette case for her. Heaven knows what else she bought that man. One mornin she drove home in one of them little red convertible cars. He come that afternoon and when he left, he took the car and Miss Kratch had an engagement ring. I guess she bubbled around all that day gettin things ready for her dinner party the next evenin. She told me it when I got there to clean the next mornin and I guess I was the only one who knew till that night.

"Garson wants to keep it a secret and then tell everyone tonight."

She didn't know whether to invite Elinor or not. The mailman came around that mornin and told us that Elinor had got in on the 8:03 last night. She stewed a long time and finally decided not to invite Elinor. The dinner came off fine and people was shocked, but pleased that Miss Kratch was gettin married.

I was there early the next mornin to clean up the mess. Miss Kratch was off on a errand when I got there. She come back lookin all caved in. I got her to lie down but I couldn't make her tell me what was wrong. The mailman came by and told us that Elinor Jenkins had never gotten home from the movies last night and that everbody was out searchin for her. Miss Kratch musta knowed about it cause she just noddod while he was talkin. Then she took a big breath and told me to call the marshal. She wouldn't tell me why. When he got there, her eyes was all red and she looked awful bad, but she got it out.

"I've been trying to reach Garson all morning, but his phone didn't answer. A while ago I drove over to his apartment and the landlady said he came home about two last night, got his clothes and his catalogue and left in a convertible. She thinks there was a girl with him. . . ."

So that's why they call her Ol' Lady Kratch now. Poor woman just seemed to wither and shrivel after Tarpley left. I guess he was her first and only chance. People say she tried to get her hooks into Tarpley from the start and that she broke up Elinor's romance to get at him and I don't know what all. I don't think she cares what they say cause she don't go out to the factory anymore and she don't dress up and she don't care about the butter plates even.